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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN CONDUCTS LOCAL "ELECTIONS"

REF: Almaty 1095

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: On October 20, Kazakhstan held local elections for 30% of the country's district and city level akims (mayors/county executives). The elections were conducted as part of the government's program to promote democratization. As the electoral process was tightly controlled by the government and did not involve direct participation by the voters, the process represented at most an incremental step toward true reform. End summary.

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THE ELECTION RULES  
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¶2. (U) On June 6, President Nazarbayev issued a decree establishing the election of 30% of district and city level akims for four-year terms. The decree was prompted by recommendations of the State Commission on Elaboration and Specification of the Program of Democratic Reforms (Democratization Commission) (reftel). The Central Elections Committee (CEC) thereafter scheduled the elections for October 20, and issued a list of 49 districts and 10 cities that would conduct elections on that date. According to CEC chairman Onalsyn Zhumabekov, elections may be held in 2007 for the remaining 70% of district and city level akims.

¶3. (U) According to the rules established by the CEC, only regional-level akims (governors) could nominate candidates for the local akim positions. (Note: regional akims are directly appointed by the president. End note.). However, the regional akims were obligated to nominate at least two candidates for each position. Candidates were required to live in the region, be at least 25 years old, file declarations of income and property, and otherwise meet all the requirements of a political government employee.

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THE CANDIDATES  
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¶4. (U) From September 5-19, the regional akims nominated candidates for the 59 positions. The candidates were then required to register with local election commissions. Of the 148 candidates nominated by regional akims, 142 were ultimately registered by the local election commissions. According to the CEC, the average age of the candidates was 48. All of the candidates had a higher education, and the field included engineers, agrarians, veterinarians, teachers, economists, lawyers, doctors, and other specialists. Five of the candidates were women. 48 of the candidates were incumbent local akims, 23 were deputy akims, 12 were lower-level government executives in rural settlements, 45 were employees of state-owned companies or government institutions, and 14 were from non-governmental institutions.

¶5. (U) Although complete figures were not available, the vast

majority of candidates were members of President Nazarbayev's Otan Party. The Republican Network of Independent Monitors (RNIM), a local NGO involved in election monitoring, sent observers to a portion of the regions conducting elections. According to RNIM, 74 of the 88 candidates in these regions were members of the Otan Party, one was a member of the Aul Party, and the rest were unaffiliated. During the nomination process, Bakhytzhan Zhumagulov, the acting chairman of the Otan Party, said that his party made recommendations to the regional akims on the nomination of candidates. According to Zhumagulov, regional akims heeded this advice on at least three occasions in which the incumbent akim was not nominated.

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THE RESULTS  
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¶16. (U) The winners were then chosen by a vote of the appropriate local maslikhat (Note: maslikhats are locally elected legislatures; the last maslikhat elections were held on September 20, 2003. End note.). Candidates needed to receive over 50% of the votes to win. The post-registration campaign process was not widely publicized, though candidates campaigned by holding meetings with maslikhat members. For example, Poloff met with central election committee officials in the western city of Atyrau and observed campaign posters produced by candidates for one of the local akim positions. The election committee officials informed Poloff that the candidates held a series of public meetings with maslikhat members to discuss issues in the community.

¶17. (U) Seven of the 142 candidates dropped out of the process before election day, including three incumbent akims. Of the 45 incumbent akims who stood for election, 39 won. The RNIM and the CEC reported that the elections were conducted without any major procedural violations.

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ANALYSIS BY OPPOSITION LEADERS, NGOS, AND THE GOVERNMENT  
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¶18. (SBU) Prior to the voting, opposition leaders such as Zharmakhan Tuyakbay and Galymzhan Zhakiyanov criticized the process, and said that the elections were not really elections at all because the presidentially-appointed regional akims had the exclusive power to select candidates, and the voters had no direct role to play. In a meeting with Poloff prior to the election, OSCE Deputy Head of Center Bjorn Halvarsson explained that the OSCE did not acknowledge the event as an election and would give little attention to the process, for the same reasons expressed by Tuyakbay and Zhakiyanov. The RNIM similarly criticized the lack of real alternatives for voters and the inability of citizens to nominate themselves for office.

¶19. (U) Noted political analyst Dosym Satpayev asserted in a recent interview in Respublika weekly that everybody in and outside of Kazakhstan understands that the elections were an imitation of real reform, and warned that the imitation of democratic and political reforms was in danger of becoming the national strategy.

¶10. (U) The government defended the process as offering a smooth and gradual transition to a system of local self-government. President Nazarbayev, speaking at the third meeting of the Democratization Commission, said that "for the mechanism of direct elections at that level to work, appropriate conditions should be developed. Among those are the political culture and maturity of the society. In election of akims, we should exercise a balanced approach. We should not lose control over the government in the regions." In the months prior to the elections, officials such as CEC chairman Zhumabekov, acting Otan Party chairman Zhumagulov, and others joined in defending the process. Among other things, they noted that maslikhat members are in the best position to select a new akim because they are very familiar with the issues in their districts. In addition, the elections would serve as a step toward democratic reform because they increased the power of the directly-elected

maslikhats.

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COMMENT  
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¶11. (SBU) Comment: The October 20 selection process for regional leaders was not an election in the truest sense of the word. The restrictive election procedures allowed for little discretion by the maslikhats, and none by the voters, and was dominated by President Nazarbayev's Otan Party. The elections therefore did not represent significant progress toward democratic reform or local self-government. At the most, they signify a small increase in the importance of the directly-elected maslikhats and may have served to increase public debate about the proper role of voters in choosing their leaders. End comment.